



## **International Journal of Business & Management Tomorrow**



### **Ethics between Professionalism and Individual Conscience in Public Administration**

Wasim I Al-Habil, Assistant professor working at the College of Commerce, Islamic University of Gaza

## **Abstract:**

The main argument is that both professionalism (rational view) and individual conscience (anti-rational view) are very important elements to be considered in terms of establishing a framework for administrative ethics. The rationalist view believes in the power of science and the ability of reason to reach reality. If reason is properly used, human behavior can be predicted and controlled. The anti-rational view which believes in the role of human beings, can never have the complete knowledge to control social order. But values and human experiences are critical elements to understand reality. This paper will put the tension between professionalism and individual conscience in the context of this dichotomy.

**Keywords:** Ethics, public administration, professionalism, and individual conscience

## **1. Introduction**

At the beginning of public administration as a self conscious discipline, the call for professionalism was an effort to overcome the corruption and spoils system and to achieve municipal reforms through applying scientific and rational bases. The call for professionalism assists the scholars of the field to establish their thoughts, ideas, and programs based on certainty, objectivity and scientific truth paving the way to contribute to the achievement of good government through expertise, technical skills, and professional authority. Alexander and Richmond (2003) state that “the ethical codes of public administration are inherently conservative in that they socialize members to a collective identity, a proscribed role dedicated to the protection of pre-defined value(s). The core of that responsibility has been to maintain the integrity of democracy by faithfully executing the will of the people, although how that will is re-presented and by who has been a perennial debate.” With expertise as the governor and decision makers of policy formulation and implementation, Waldo (1948) argued the age old question of how we ensure that we have good government (by having the good people govern) was converted into a technical problem. Good government having efficient and effective performances is accomplished by experts whose scientific knowledge is utilized to the achievement of politically defined ends.

## **2. Professional Standards and Individual Conscience**

Adams and Balfour (2004) argue in their book *Unmasking Administrative Evil* that neither professional standards nor individual conscience can be alone the framework for administrative ethics. This argument seems to consist with the conflict between the rational view and the anti-rational view which not only does shape the notion of administrative ethics, but it also influences the entire field of public administration through what is traditionally known as the politics-administration dichotomy. The rationalist view believes in the power of science and the ability of reason to reach reality. If reason is properly used, human behavior can be predicted and controlled. The anti-rational view believes in the role of human beings can never have the complete knowledge to control social order. Values and human experiences are critical elements to understand reality. This paper will put the tension between professionalism and individual conscience in the context of this dichotomy. Although both sides have some weaknesses, both of them have also strengths that should be counted. The main argument is that both professionalism and individual conscience are very important elements to be considered in terms of establishing a framework for administrative ethics.

The roots of the tension between the rational view and the anti-rational view of life goes deeply back in the history when one reads what different philosophers wrote in the Enlightenment era (Adams and Balfour, 2004). Spicer (1995) recognizes many rational views of modern philosophers such as Rousseau, Comte, Mill, and Dewey who have influenced American public administration. On the other hand, other anti-rational philosophers such as Locke, Hume, Smith, and Burke besides the founders have their influence on public administration. By the influence of rationality, early writers in the field of public administration “emphasized the power of reason to order human affairs” (Spicer, 1995, p.27). Most of the founders of the field such as

Wilson, Goodnow, White, Taylor, Fayol, Mayo, Gulick, and Weber were rationalists. Only very few expectations such as Follett did not represent the rational view in public administration.

Not until the second half of the last century, when the anti-rational views have started to make more influence in the field by the work of Waldo *The Administrative State* in 1948. Then, additional anti-rational views have started to put stronger influence on the field such as the Minnowbrook conference of new public administration in the 1970s, Blacksburg Manifesto in the 1980s, and new public service in the new century. In fact, the major sign for the rational stream in public administration is the focus on the scientific approach to see public administration detached from the influence of politics. On the other hand, the anti-rational stream tends to focus on the attached influence of political values on public administration. These two different aspects move in parallel trends in the field to affect all the major issues including the role of professionalism and individual values in drawing the ethics in public administration.

### **3. Friedrich and Finer debate**

Friedrich and Finer debate, in the beginning of 1940s, about the most effective way to ensure accountability of public officials in democratic system introduced the anti-rational paradigm shift in the field. This debate is an important figure in deciding whether professionalism or individual conscience has the superiority to draw the framework for administrative ethics. This importance is based on the fact the Friedrich and Finer debate referred to the role of professional standards and individual values in public accountability, which can be reflected in the same framework of administrative ethics. The tension between the rational view that advocates professionalism and the anti-rational view that supports the role of individual conscience, values, and politics can be clearly seen in this debate.

Friedrich (1940) believes that public officials can deal with administrative problems effectively through internal checks. These checks are created by professional standards and technical knowledge to ensure accountability. Thus, the professionals' responsibility cannot be held to politicians and elected legislators, but it should be to their colleagues who have the same technical knowledge and standards. One can imply from Friedrich's rational view that the complexity of public administration requires professionals to deal with ethical decisions because they are the only ones who have the knowledge to enclose the proper understanding of how to deal with ethical issues. Thus, professionalism is the appropriate framework to guide administrative ethics because its technical knowledge ensures the proper standards of ethics.

On the other hand, Finer (1941) thinks that external control by the elected legislators is the only way to maintain responsibility of officials in public administration. In general, Finer believes that public professionals cannot decide what is the appropriate action that ensures public good. Finer (1941) states that "the servants of public are not to decide their own course; they are to be responsible to the elected representative to the public" (p.7). Otherwise, the internal checks and control of professionals will lead, according to Finer, to corruption in public administration (Shafritz et al., 2004).

Based on Finer's anti-rational position, one may imply that the proper framework of administrative ethics cannot be built based on professionalism. The technical knowledge does not have the legitimacy to be the foundation of ethical public administration. These administrative ethics should be established through the legislative body that reflects the feelings, beliefs, and wishes of people. This argument opens the door to accept the role of individual conscience and values that belong to the same foundation. This argument can be clearer if we consider Rohr's (1986) understanding of representative bureaucracy, which meets, in a sense, the same purpose of representative democracy that the Founders intended to have. Based on this view, millions of people, who work in the bureaucratic body, represent themselves and participate in the government. This notion implies that these people have the constitutional legitimacy to use their individual conscience and values as foundation for ethical public administration.

## **4. Limitations of Rational/Technical/Professional Approach**

The identification of ethical behavior with adherence to technical expertise has not been without its strengths in public administration but it has also brought a number of ethical dilemmas. Professional ethics of any vocation maintain and presuppose the validity of established practices and part of this involves acceptance of core precepts. In public administration, that core precept has been technical rationalism, which precludes ethical reasoning because it maintains a focus on instrumental reasoning and external accountability to rules rather than moral agency and attention to ends (Pugh, 1991; Thompson; Adams and Balfour, 1998). As a result, most conceptions of professional behavior in public administration that issue from the orthodoxy through the new public management have remained amoral in character.

A second difficulty posed by the ethic of technical/professional rationality is that it fostered a *modus operandi* that is elitist and inherently anti-democratic. Waldo wrote of this danger in *The Administrative State* when he noted that administration by elite professionals subverts democracy and becomes rule by the philosopher kings (1948). Professional administrators who have mastered a body of knowledge that informs their judgments are disinclined to value input from a disorganized cacophony of citizens who may perceive their needs differently. The esoteric language that accompanies specialized training and the tendency of organizations to value what they can measure rather than worker-citizen interactions further reinforces the disaffection of citizens from government processes. The conceptual strands that identify values to guide professional behavior in Public Administration, are multiple but the story that has emerged is a progression from a call for science and neutrality during the Progressive Era to recognition of the inescapably political character of practice by the 1940's.

A group of bureaucrats including street-level workers are *de facto* policy makers functioning at some far distance from direct accountability and close follow-up because their work is not directly traceable or observable (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). As Maynard-Moody and Musheno state "street level work is, ironically, rule saturated but not rule bound" because "rules and procedures can never universally fit each case and every circumstance" (2003: 10). Handling so many different cases operating under so many different circumstances, front line workers typically use their personal value system, or cultural frame to discern which rules apply in a given context (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). Accountability of front line work is further attenuated if citizens are involuntary and do not serve as a reference group for the bureaucracy that 'serves' them (Lipsky, 1980:28). The limitation here is that professional ethical frameworks cannot provide support for discretionary action that protects citizens from harm in each scenario or case. Alexander and Richmond (2003) add that "front line works are typically not masked from the impact of their actions on citizens. When front line administrators are aware that enactment of a policy will result in harm, they need a logic that supports the protection of citizenry."

## **5. Ethics of New Public Service**

Recently, there are two competing paradigms that guide administrative action. One is led by logic of public choice economics and business that has seen government as a proxy for market/customer relations which seeks to achieve human self interest. The second paradigm, based on the political logic of democratic citizenship and civil society to enhance representative democracy and Constitutional values, seeks equity, justice, representation and participation in public administration. Many PA scholars have sought to establish the administrative ethical frameworks on different bases including professional standards and internal technical knowledge to ensure accountability (Friedrich, 1940), the regime values of the Constitution (Rohr, 1978), an agential perspective attentive to institutional values (Wamsley, et al, 1996), social equity (Frederickson, 1990), and procedural values that enhance representative democracy by accountability to citizenry (Stivers, 1990, 1994; King and Stivers, 1998; Cooper, 1998).

Alexander and Richmond (2003) state “Those who advocate for the “new public service” encourage administrators to view themselves as “professional citizens,” to develop horizontal ties with citizenry, and inform political mandates through active citizen-administrator relationships, thereby shoring up the rather shaky process of formal legal democracy. The professional ethic emerging from this body of work is grounded in a pragmatic recognition of the limitations of representative democracy and the political logic of popular sovereignty.” Scholars call bureaucrats to respect their relationship and responsibility to citizenry at the first stage and organizational missives at the second one (Cooper, 1998).

Political accountability is further outlined in the ASPA Code of Ethics which confirms that bureaucrats are responsible when their decisions are attentive to the democratic principles that identify and ground public administration (Hejka-Ekins, 1988; Pugh, 1991). The Code calls its members to practice discretion to “work to improve and change laws and policies that are counter-productive or obsolete,” and to “promote constitutional principles of equality, fairness, representativeness, responsiveness, and due process in protecting citizens’ rights.”

Fox (2001) argue that organizational code of ethics cannot cover all the different situation or conflicts that administrators might face and consequently the described ethical frameworks or approaches which encourages moral agency, a strong citizen identification, and the political logic of democracy and Constitutionalism, aims to support administrative action when the organizational rules cannot meet the situation or run out.

## 6. Conclusion

Specifically, writers about ethics in public administration have been shaped by the two different main streams in terms of whether to depend on professional standards or on individual conscience to structure the administrative ethics. According to Kyarimpa and Zamor (2006), there is no agreement about the most effective method to handle the ethics in public affairs. The group that advocates for relying on professionalism to determine the framework of administrative ethics thinks that formal fixed codes that are built on technical knowledge will strengthen the role of ethics in public administration. Thus, to ensure the efficient performance of public administration, officials must follow goals, mission statements, rules, and regulations, which is the ethical instrument to distinguish between what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. This group criticizes the people who believe in the role of individual conscience because of the subjectivity, uncertainty, and vagueness that it includes. Relying on individual conscience can lead to conflicts in public administration because public servants have different values. Thus, to avoid this conflict, public administration should build its ethical framework based on professional standards.

On the other hand, the group that supports the use of individual conscience as a foundation for ethical administration, according to Kyarimpa and Zamor (2006), believes that cultural, political and social environment besides the individual conscience plays the critical role in deciding the administrative ethics. Kyarimpa and Zamor (2006) affirm that it “is public servant’s internal moral character and individual conscience that is critical in ensuring that actions are ethical” (p.33). Chapman (1993) also considers the personal values of public officials as the most important element in administrative ethics. This group criticizes the reliance only on professional code of ethics because they do not help public administrators to deal with real situations.

Kyarimpa and Zamor (2006) clarify this criticism when they state that “while rules, regulations, and ethics codes of conduct are instrumental in educating, training, and orienting public servants toward an ethical posture, they do not adequately prepare them to handle issues associated with, say, conflicts of interest and discretionary authority” (p.34). Thus, individual conscience is the source of distinguishing what is right and



what is wrong; and the assurance that guides professional codes of ethics. Based on this argument, public administration should build its ethical framework based on individual conscience.

In fact, the adequate framework for administrative ethics should be established based on a mixed approach that benefits from the advantages of each one, professionalism and individual conscience. Therefore, administrative ethics should reflect professional standards that ensure the “highest requirements of scientific work” (Friedrich, 1940). On the other hand, administrative ethics should also take in consideration the individual conscience of public officials because it is the actual source that helps officials to make judgments. In other words, public administrators cannot neglect neither professional standards nor conscience and values when they face ethical conflicts. There should be trusted codes to guide public servants as well as an active conscience to help them and vice versa. If public officials miss a professional code of ethics, there will be no acceptable standards that help them to evaluate any conflict. The professional standards offer the appropriate basis to start. Also, if public administrators cannot use their individual judgment to deal with the professional codes, these codes can be misleading because they do not specify the right action for each specific case.

Waldo (2000) creates an effective map that presents the relationship between public administration and ethics. Based on this map public administrators should have strong obligations to self, democracy, general welfare, and humanity at the same time when they should have the same strong obligations to the Constitution, laws, organizational-bureaucratic norms, and professionalism. This is the appropriate balance that always should be observed in terms of ethical administration. In sum, both professionalism and individual conscience are very important components that should be considered if we want to establish an effective framework for administrative ethics. ■

**Wasim I Al-Habil**, is an assistant professor working at the College of Commerce in the Islamic University of Gaza. His research focuses on public administration in the Middle East and Palestine.

## References

- Adams, Guy B. and Balfour, Danny L. (2004). *Unmasking administrative evil*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Chapman, R. A. (1993). *Ethics in public service*. In R. A. Chapman (ed). *Ethics in Public Service*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Cooper, T. (1998). *The Responsible administrator: An approach to ethics for the administrative role* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Finer, Herman. (1941). Administrative responsibility in democratic government. *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 1, (pp.335-350)
- Fox, C. 1. (2001). *The use of philosophy in administrative ethics*. In T. Cooper (Ed.), *Handbook of Administrative Ethics* (pp.105-130). New York: Marcel Dekker.
- Friedrich, Carl J., (1940). Public policy and the nature of administrative responsibility. In Carl J. Friedrich (ed). *Public Policy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hejka-Ekins, A.(1988). *Teaching Ethics in Public Administration*. *Public Administration Review*, 48, 885-891.
- King, C.S. & Stivers, C. (1998). *Government is Us: Public Administration in an Anti-Government Era*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Kyarimpa, Genevieve Enid; Garcia-Zamor, Jean-Claude. (2006). The quest for public service ethics: individual conscience and organizational constraints. *Public Money & Management*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (pp31-38).
- Lipsky, S. (1980). *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

- Maynard-Moody, S. and M. Musheno (2003). *Cops, Teachers and Counselors: Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Pugh, D. L. (1991). The origins of ethical frameworks in public administration. In J. S. Bowman (Ed.), *Ethical Frontiers in Public Management* (pp.9-33). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rohr, John A. (1998). Constitution of the United States. In Jay M. Shafritz (Ed). *International Encyclopedia of Public Policy and Administration*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Rohr, J. A. (1985). Professionalism, Legitimacy and the Constitution. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 8(4), 401-418.
- Rohr, J. (1978). *Ethics for Bureaucrats*. New York: Marcel Dekker.
- Spicer, Michael W. (1995). The founders, the Constitution, and public administration: a conflict in world views Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Stivers, C. (1990). *Active citizenship and public administration*. In G. L. Wamsley, R.N. Bacher, C. T. Goodsell, P.S. Kronenberg, I. A. Rohr, C. M Stivers, O. F. White and J. F Wolf (Eds.), *Refounding Public Administration* (pp. 246-273). Newbury Park: Sage
- Stivers, C. (1994). The listening bureaucrat: responsiveness in public administration. *Public Administration Review*, 54(4), 364-369.
- Thompson, D. F. (1985). *The Possibility of Administrative Ethics*. *Public administration Review*, 45,555-561.
- Waldo, Dwight. (2000). The relationship between ethics and public administration: The concept of competing ethical obligation. In Richard J. Stillman (Ed.), *Public Administration: Concepts and Cases* (pp. 498-512). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Waldo, D. (1948). *The Administrative State*. New York: Holmes and Meier Publishing.
- Wamsley,G., Goodsell, C.T., Rohr, J.A., Stivers, C.M., White, O.F. & Wolf, J. (1987). In R.C. Chandler (Ed.), *A Centennial History of the American Administrative State* (pp.291-317).